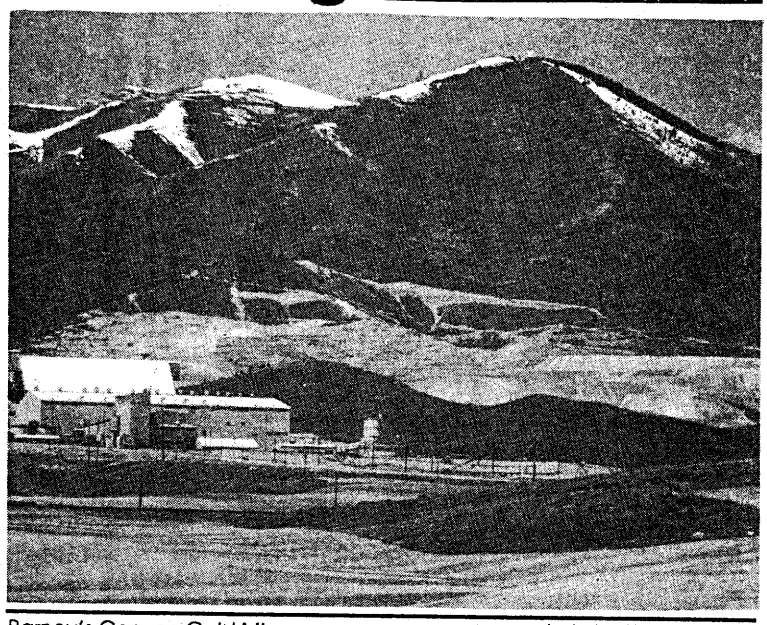
OQUIRRH EYESORE



Barney's Canyon Gold Mine photo by Steve Midgley

Eternally victimized by a cretaceous curse that left the limestone and quartzite Oquirrh Mountains susceptible to rich porphyry ore deposits, the legacy of the range is one of wasted beauty.

Too bad for Utah that John Muir moved
to headier climes and causes in California.

During a visit here, our country's most
nous naturalist hiked into the Oquirrh
ountains—that ugly sister range that de-
es the western border of Salt Lake
unty—and marveled at the flowers, vege-
ion and wildlife. His impressions are re-
rded in the book "Steep Trails."

Alas, his are some of the few kind words
er written or spoken about the Oquirrhs.
orse, despite having an environmentalist
every living tree in Southern Utah and a
use celebré lurking beneath every dirt road
oking to be coated with tar and gravel there,
v of the environmentally aware ever ven-
e the 20 or so miles from Salt Lake City
o the Oquirrhs. Too bad for them, for there
nain pockets of real beauty high in the
uirrhs that rival any found along the
asatch, and unfettered by encroachment
m land developers, the Oquirrhs have the
ential to become a real backyard environ-
ntal cause for the next century.

In defense of the environmentalists, the
uirrhs are unique among Utah mountain
ges in that the vast majority of the range is
vately owned. That, in environmental
ns, means that not even the Patron Saint of
t Causes can do much now to turn the tide
environmental damage so extreme it is
ble from space.

The largest owners and exploiters of the
irrhs have always been the mining com-
ies; today the banner being held by Ken-
ott Corporation. But they were not alone.
Oquirrhs were plundered early on for its
ber, some of it still visible today in the
cturally sound and acoustically perfect
Tabernacle. The Oquirrhs were also
vily grazed by sheep and cattle men. Now,
r a century of abuse, the Oquirrhs can take
more, and the future of the Oquirrhs, if
e is one, rests almost solely on the shoul-
of one man—Paul Rokich.

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Most valley dwellers only know that the
irrhs harbor Kennecott's huge mining
ration at Bingham Canyon—a pit so deep
from the observation platform at just
e mid-level, one would look down on
Sears Tower if it were placed in the
om. That amazing statistic is even more
zing when one understands that there
once a mountain on top of the pit! From
to-rim, the pit is nearly three miles wide.
te (or politely, overburden) has always
been dumped into side canyons of the Oquirrhs, filling them, and most prominently over the eastern edges of the range. The mine dumps tower above the valley floor near Lark at Butterfield Canyon and stretch for miles along the range, marking the Oquirrhs for all to see as one major mess.

The ore extraction process at the Magna smelters has also left square miles of tailings stacked neatly beside the range and the Great Salt Lake. As Magna residents know, no one realizes they're there until the wind blows from the north. Then, it's get inside, call Mark Eubank, and hope that Kennecott has spent enough money to actually fix the problem. The company assures that it has.

Additionally, a rich gold reserve was discovered in the Barney's Canyon area in the mid-80s and a new, separate, open-pit operation is cutting up the midriff. To the south, at Mercur (luckily not visible from our side of the range) another open-pit gold operation is in full bloom. Given time and reserves, the Oquirrhs just might disappear.

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Enter again Paul Rokich.

Like most Utah persons of ethnicity, the Rokich family came to Utah to earn their daily bread as miners. From his Smelter Camp home, at the devastated, defoliated, and sulfer-ridden north end of the Oquirrhs, Rokich early on vowed to renew that tragic landscape. He nurtured a dream to revegetate and invigorate the Oquirrhs, and began studies in botany at the University of Utah.

By 1958, despite forebodings that his dream would take 20,000 years to accomplish—if it worked at all—Rokich was ready. Armed with a 60-pound backpack full of saplings, Rokich one night trespassed onto Kennecott property, hiked high up into Black Rock Canyon, and began planting trees. Only one-quarter of what he planted lived, but Rokich weekly trekked into the Oquirrhs nonetheless. Over 60,000 trees have now been personally planted by Paul Rokich in the Oquirrhs. "I thought that if I got this started, when I was dead and gone people would come and see it. I never thought I'd live to see it myself," he recently told, believe it or not, *Reader's Digest*.

For 15 years, Rokich worked almost unaided, and beneath the wary eye of Kennecott authorities and property guards. However, by the early '70s environmental awareness gripped even the likes of mighty Kennecott, so it hired Rokich as an environmental engineer and assigned him the task of cleaning up the Oquirrhs unabated. His duties include not only salvaging the barren tracts of the northern Oquirrhs, but also trying to find methods to rehabilitate the huge mine waste dumps to the south.

And therein lies the rub.

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When Kennecott began digging at the Barney's Canyon site (identified as the smudge on the mountain that has the TV transmitters on it. Another Kennecott gold digging, the Melco Pit, is visible higher and to the south between Barney's Canyon and the Bingham mine), it was required by federal law to rehabilitate the terrain damaged in the mining process. To that end, topsoil has been retained to re-cover the dumps that will be leveled off, re-terrained, re-sloped and revegetated when mining operations cease (estimated to be in the mid-90s). Same goes for the cyanide leaching pads that are used to chemically extract the gold from Barney's Canyon, and for all roads leading to and from the site. Buildings and structures will come down. Before the first spade of dirt was turned, Kennecott filed an environmental impact plan with the Division of Oil, Gas and Mining covering all aspects of reclamation, including financing (it's posted a bond). Considering the richness of the deposit, financing will not be the problem—plant growth will be, and the pit itself is not re-claimable. It will be fenced and secured, barring access.

"It's our objective to minimize environmental impacts to the maximum extent possible," says Greg Boyce, director of government and public affairs for Kennecott Corporation. Boyce himself worked at the Bingham Canyon mine so, like any other person who has had contact with the massive pit and dump sites, he certainly understands that it will be quite some time before the corn crop comes in.

Indeed, Kennecott's Bingham Canyon operation is virtually exempt from the restrictions that apply to the Barney's Canyon site, (due to the size of the operation there is no precedent for what can or cannot be reclaimed); because many other mining companies, now gone, also had contributed to the problem; and, because Kennecott was in operation decades before anyone had an inkling of what environmental impact was.

Therefore, if and when mining operations cease at the big pit (which has about a 30-year life unless new ore deposits or new mining techniques are discovered), it will be up to the work of Paul Rokich and his team to determine if plant life will ever grow on the waste dumps. Forget re-sloping and grading—that would take another 100 years—just let's see if anything will grow there again.

Because the copper pit cuts from bedrock, it is incredibly unlikely that any vegetation will ever grow there before we visit Mars. Also, the operation is a registered National Historic Site, which further sullies the stew—preserve it as it is, or as it was?

But the waste dumps, those wonderous playgrounds for every kid that ever grew up in Bingham Canyon are another matter. They, theoretically, have hope.

They have hope despite what every one of those kids, now adults, can tell you: They were barren when they were kids, barren when their parents were kids, and they're barren today. Any of them can quickly recall the odorous copper-colored leach water that accumulated at the bottoms of the dumps after every rain, then spilled into Bingham Creek, and down the canyon to who knows where. That's another problem in the Oquirrhs—in some of the canyons that had running creeks, they now run mostly dry, much of the drainage being sucked into ancient underground mines, sometimes re-emerging and flowing a perfect brown.

The Oquirrhs remain home to one of Utah's grandest elk herds, support a thriving deer population, and provide shelter to most every other Utah critter and predator—even in the areas that Paul Rokich has worked so hard to save. There may be hope for the Oquirrhs, but for now, brown is not the perfect color for a mountain range—and blue will be the color of our memories if they are not saved.

by john saltas

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